



Interview with Terra Elan McVoy

Tallahassee native
and Lincoln High
School Grad...
the Author of
"Pure"



Question 1:

As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

Well, there's a famous family story that I used to want to be fire when I grew up. But I also really thought I'd be a teacher.

Question 2:

What were your teenage years like growing up here in Tallahassee?

My teenage years in Tallahassee I think were pretty average. I had a good gang of friends, I liked school pretty much, sang in Chorus, had a decent relationship with my parents and my sisters, went to church and was very active in my youth group, had a job, experimented with music and clothes to reflect my style. (Lots of electronica, and bohemian outfits!) I wasn't super-popular but people knew who I was and it wasn't like I was shoved into lockers or picked on in PE, either. I was a very serious reader and writer, and was of course always falling deeply in love with some boy or another. I had pimples and curfew and all that stuff—nothing too tumultuous but of course it was all very dramatic to me!

Question 3:

When you were in high school, which authors were your favorite and how did they influence your writing later on?

Well, when I read *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE* for the first time it totally blew my mind. And I was getting very much into poetry then—Gertrude Stein and E.E. Cummings and things like that. I was head-over-heels for *THE SCARLET LETTER* and also really loved *ALL THE*

KING'S MEN, which is still my favorite book of all time. I

also read a lot of Dean Koontz and Stephen King though. Mainly I read and read and read—constantly. And I wrote a lot too, either stories or poetry or in my journals. I entered some contests and won some awards, but mainly it was all that practice reading and writing that helped me develop as a real writer.

Question 4:

When did you first realize that you wanted to be a writer?

It wasn't really like that for me. Meaning, I didn't really "realize" I wanted to be a writer. I've just loved reading and writing from the minute I figured out how to do both, which was, like, age 4. It's just something I've always done and always loved. At one point I thought I wanted to be a marine mammologist, but my dad sat me down my senior year and was like, "Babe, you make straight C's in Chemistry. And you're going to have to take a lot more Chemistry to be any kind of scientist. But you make straight A's in English and you love it. Why not stick with what you're naturally drawn to?" And I guess (once I got over thinking of my dad as a dream-crusher), I've just followed my literary heart since then.

Question 5:

When did you first consider yourself a writer?

Again, see the above answer, because it's just something I've always done. In a lot of ways I still don't think of myself as "a writer,"

though I'm getting more comfortable with that. I am a person who is totally in love with writing and stories and language and characters and images. I just happened to be really lucky and get myself in a position where I could get paid to do it, which I never thought would happen and which still stuns me!

Question 6:

What inspired you to write *Pure*?

Well, I was really active in my church and my youth group when I was growing up. It wasn't one of those Bible-thumping, no-dancing kind of churches, but still I was wrestling with matching my faith with a regular high school life: one with boys and parties and the popular girls and all that. So that was my background. Later, when I was working in New York in publishing, I was reading all this kind of either extremely glamorous or extremely traumatic YA fiction, and I was like, "Gosh this doesn't really reflect what my experience in high school was like, when I was going to dances and playing my guitar and making out and going on peace marches and mission trips." And then I came across this statistic that said some huge number of teens were involved in their churches, which made me go, "Ohuh, yeah. Where's the book for that kid?" And when my editor showed me an article about purity rings, it all kind of came together—the ring was the hook to hang this bigger story on: one about trying to come to grips with your faith and at the same time be a regular high school kid.

Question 7:

How has the publishing and success of *Pure* changed your life?

Well, I haven't been able to quit my job (and I don't think I would, anyway), if that's what you mean. Mainly it means that I am more disciplined about my writing than I ever was. Before I could just write when I felt like it, and write whatever I was moved to write. Now, because there's another book coming down the pike, I have to write every chance I can. And I have to stick to this project, even when it's frustrating or scary or hard. I'm also a lot more public about my writing now than I was, doing interviews like this and going to schools and stuff. Before my writing was just for me. Now it is for me, and a lot of fantastic readers!

Question 8:

Is there a message in *"Pure"* that you want your readers to grasp?

I think the biggest thing I hope readers get from *"Pure"* is an understanding that whatever it is we believe in ourselves—whether it's God or Allah or the Purple Donkey of Kathmandu—everyone else has a thing that they believe in just as much, that is just as important to them. Whatever you think is really, truly, seriously right, someone else has something the feel is just as right, even if it's not the same as what you believe. I hope it will, at least a little, raise some sensitivity to that.

Question 9:

Can you share a little of what you are currently working on?

My new project is a book called *After the Kiss*. It's coming out in May 2010, and it's a novel in poems, which I'm really excited about. The story centers around two girls who don't know each other, but are connected by the fact that one of them hooks up with the other one's boyfriend (without knowing he had a girlfriend). The drama ensues!

Question 10:

What advice would you give to teens who want to pursue a writing career?

Write and keep writing and don't stop writing. In the rest of your time (when you aren't, you know, being serious about school and friends and stuff), read. Read as much as you can. Read everything you can. That includes newspapers and magazines and books you wouldn't be caught dead looking at, not just the ones by authors you like. If you are serious about being a writer, you need to know what's already out there. You will ultimately be entering a conversation that's been going on for centuries and you don't want to sound like a dumbass when you get there. And everything you read teaches you a little more about writing. Don't worry about the publishing part. If you are talented and disciplined and dedicated then the publishing part will eventually come. For now, focus on being the best writer possible.
